

# **MARLAS SPECIAL ISSUE**

## ***Political, Social, and Cultural Upheavals in the COVID-19 Era in Latin America***

Diane E. Johnson and Mario Siddhartha Portugal Ramírez  
Issue Editors

### **Content**

1. Introduction: “Political, Social, and Cultural Upheavals in the COVID-19 Era in Latin America”  
–Diane E. Johnson and Mario Siddhartha Portugal Ramírez
2. “The Harmful Effects of Denial: When Political Polarization meets COVID-19 Social Distancing”  
–Tharcisio Leone
3. “A luta coletiva dos entregadores latino-americanos contra a pandemia do capitalismo -- movimentos grevistas em tempos de Covid-19”  
–Bruna da Penha de Mendonça Coelho, Ana Beatriz Bueno de Jesus, and Maria Eugênia Pinheiro Sena da Silva
4. “Pandemia y crisis del sujeto neoliberal: Algunas reflexiones sobre la emergencia del Covid-19”  
–Diego Alejandro López González and Edward Herrera Sanclemente
5. “Politics of Expertise and Blame during COVID-19 Quarantine in Chile”  
–Kelly Bauer and Claudio A. Villalobos
6. “The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Impacts on Social Welfare in Brazil: The Rise of Poverty and Inequalities”  
–Daniel Francisco Nagao Menezes and Ernani Contipelli
7. “Nos/otros: poesía de la pandemia, parte 2”  
–María Roof

# ***Introduction: "Political, Social, and Cultural Upheavals in the COVID-19 Era in Latin America"***

Diane E. Johnson  
Lebanon Valley College  
[djohnson@lvc.com](mailto:djohnson@lvc.com)

Mario Siddhartha Portugal Ramírez  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
[m.portugalramirez001@umb.edu](mailto:m.portugalramirez001@umb.edu)

Introduction to the MARLAS special issue on the COVID-19 in Latin America.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Latin America, politics, social upheavals, cultural reactions

Introducción al número especial de MARLAS sobre el COVID-19 en Latinoamérica.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19, Latinoamérica, política, disrupciones sociales, reacciones culturales

In May 2020, the World Health Organization declared Latin America the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, where experts estimated that there had been approximately 2 million cases and nearly 100,000 deaths. By late July, Reuters reported that Latin America accounted for more than 25% of the world's cases, making it the region with the largest number of confirmed cases globally.<sup>1</sup> While those figures were tragic, increases since then have been staggering. A recent report from the Americas Society/Council of the Americas (AS/COA) showed that by the end of January 2021, the total number of confirmed cases in Brazil alone—more than 8.5 million—was more than four times as many as in the whole region six months earlier.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the number of deaths due to COVID-19 since June 2020 has grown at a truly frightening pace. The German database company Statista estimated that as of February 1, 2021, the total number of deaths due to the virus worldwide was more than 2.2 million,

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in Elizabeth Gonzalez et al., "The Coronavirus in Latin America." Online report published by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, Jan. 20, 2021. Available at <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/coronavirus-latin-america>.

<sup>2</sup> Gonzalez et al., "The Coronavirus," Jan. 20, 2021.

with five of the top fifteen countries located in Latin America (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and Peru).<sup>3</sup> Latin America has become a region where people with COVID-19 have less likelihood of surviving the virus. In fact, some of the highest case-fatality rates globally have been registered in countries in the region: Mexico (8.5%), Ecuador (5.9%), and Bolivia (4.8%).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the grievous loss of life, COVID-19 has led to other economic, political, social, and cultural upheavals in Latin America in the last eleven months. By July 2020, the United Nations was projecting a 9.1% annual drop in gross domestic product in the region.<sup>5</sup> In its report, the UN called the recession in Latin America the worst in a century, which could increase the number of poor people by 45 million, and the number of extremely poor by 28 million. This would also have the effect of increasing inequalities, exclusion, and discrimination in the region, adversely affecting “the enjoyment of human rights and democratic developments, potentially even leading to civil unrest.” The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean predicted a regional unemployment rate of approximately 13.5% by the end of 2020, a 5.4% increase from 2019.<sup>6</sup> Virtually no sector has been untouched by the crisis, from travel and tourism to online delivery services, to energy, education, migration, and social media. As articles in this special issue make clear, beliefs about the spread of the virus, as well as the appropriate government responses, also have divided Latin Americans along political and ideological lines, as they have in the US.

In our regular June 2020 issue of *MARLAS*, we included a group of eleven commentaries on some of the early effects of COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> While much has changed with respect to COVID in Latin America since then, as noted above, we have also seen some continuities. Several of the commentaries focused on Brazil, where the first case of coronavirus in Latin America was confirmed at the end of February 2020. Eduardo José Grin wrote that President Jair Bolsonaro, like then-US President Donald Trump, played down the danger of COVID and refused to adopt a national strategy to combat its effects. This is still the case, although by late January 2021, thousands of Brazilians on both the right and the left had taken to the streets to protest Bolsonaro’s handling of the COVID crisis, and several polls showed sharp declines in his popularity in recent months.<sup>8</sup> In a separate commentary on COVID in Brazil from the June 2020 *MARLAS* issue, Carla Almeida, Lígia Lüchmann, and Carla Martelli argued that social inequalities are an important cause of the high incidence of COVID, and that only

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<sup>3</sup> Statista report, “Number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths worldwide as of February 1, 2021, by country.” Available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>.

<sup>4</sup> John Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center. Accessed February 4, 2021. Available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean,” July 2020. Available at [https://guyana.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/SG%20Policy%20brief%20COVID%20LAC%20%28English%29\\_10%20July.pdf](https://guyana.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/SG%20Policy%20brief%20COVID%20LAC%20%28English%29_10%20July.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Contraction of Economic Activity in the Region Intensifies Due to the Pandemic: It Will Fall -9.1% in 2020,” press release July 15, 2020. Available at <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/contraction-economic-activity-region-intensifies-due-pandemic-it-will-fall-91-2020>.

<sup>7</sup> *MARLAS* 4 (1), June 2020. [www.marlasjournal.com](http://www.marlasjournal.com)

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Andrew Rosati, “Bolsonaro’s Popularity Crumbles as Covid-19 Crisis Rages,” Bloomberg News Jan. 22, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-22/bolsonaro-s-popularity-drops-as-covid-19-crisis-rages-poll-says>.

the Brazilian National Health System implemented under the 1988 constitution had ameliorated a national catastrophe—a claim echoed by Daniel Francisco Nagao Menezes and Ernani Contipelli in this special issue. In contrast, Miguel Ángel Latouche in his commentary reported that despite the diminished capacity of Venezuela’s National Health System, the epidemic there was relatively moderate, owing largely to extensive government control measures. This is another observation from six months ago that seems to have held; in terms of COVID-related deaths, Venezuela ranks sixteenth among Latin American and Caribbean countries.<sup>9</sup>

The five articles in this special issue on COVID-19 examine various ways that the virus has affected virtually all aspects of life in Latin America. They have a common thread: the reactions among the populations toward the improvised actions taken by national and local governments to contain the pandemic. Those measures, which have included policies such as total lockdowns, have been contested due to their allegedly limited effects on containing the pandemic and because of their dramatic impacts on the economy and the sociopolitical life of the people. As a result, many Latin American countries are showing sometimes spontaneous, sometimes organized, actions and reactions against the “new normal” that is being preached by different actors. The articles included here show that the vitality of society, especially in Latin America, is leading governments and their policies along unforeseen paths. While much of the focus is on the terrible damage that COVID has inflicted over the last year, several of the authors point out that by revealing deeper structural problems, it may also have created important opportunities for change.

In “The Harmful Effects of Denial: When Political Polarization Meets COVID-19 Social Distancing,” Tharcisio Leone uses geolocation data from mobile phone users to analyze the extent to which Brazilians practiced social distancing after local lockdown rules were introduced and whether their political orientation correlated with their decision. Leone builds on work done by other scholars that demonstrates the importance of political attitudes in determining physical distancing responses. The central government in Brazil has not developed a program to address COVID-19, leaving it to policymakers at the subnational level. And in fact, President Bolsonaro has consistently attacked social-distancing requirements implemented by the states, arguing that they should be applied only to individuals in the highest-risk categories. Thus, Leone hypothesized that municipalities with a higher share of Bolsonaro voters would be more likely to take the risk of being infected and break the rules for social distancing.

Geolocation data from nearly 60 million smartphone users during a 103-day period from early February to mid-May 2020 supports Leone’s expectation. He finds that coronavirus lockdown measures applied in Brazilian states did not meet their targets in reducing the circulation of persons. The impact of social-distancing measures was significantly lower in municipalities with a higher proportion of Bolsonaro voters. While the author acknowledges some limitations that should be addressed in future research, in particular the addition of controls for important determinants of social

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<sup>9</sup> Statista report, “Number of confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Latin America and the Caribbean,” updated in mid-January 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1101643/latin-america-caribbean-coronavirus-cases/>; in the nineteen countries covered by the AS/COA report by Gonzalez et al. (2021), only Cuba, Uruguay, and El Salvador have had fewer confirmed cases than Venezuela.

distancing (e.g., urban density, level of education, and poverty, and the share of the population involved in essential activities), his findings make an important contribution to what we know about the effect of lockdowns in Brazil, as well as offering new technology-based methods that can be applied elsewhere by scholars.

In “A luta coletiva dos entregadores latino-americanos contra a pandemia do capitalismo – movimentos grevistas em tempos de Covid-19,” Bruna da Penha de Mendonça Coelho, Ana Beatriz Bueno de Jesus, and Maria Eugênia Pinheiro Sena da Silva focus on the struggle of workers, specifically delivery workers, to claim labor rights during the pandemic. Focusing on the period from April to September 2020, the authors examine three international strikes in Latin America—in Argentina, Ecuador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Peru, Mexico, Chile, and Brazil—as well as work stoppages in Brazil before and after the international strikes. The authors emphasize the juxtaposition of the growing demand for delivery services and their increasing profitability during the pandemic, with the worsening of the delivery workers’ living and working conditions. They argue that an important characteristic of the prevailing neoliberal regime is to deregulate labor relations and disarticulate workers, leaving them fragmented and less aware of class and collectivity. This includes the concept of *uberization*, a global trend that affects the organization, management, and control of work.

One of the most important ramifications for delivery workers is the effort to portray them as entrepreneurs who choose their own working hours and manage their own business. In reality, however, workers are constantly monitored by the delivery platforms and are subject to penalties such as the blocking of work. Moreover, because they are not recognized as employees, it is more difficult to achieve collective articulation and recognition of demands for rights led by unions or professional associations.

Interestingly, however, the further degradation of working conditions, increased exposure to risk, and increased precariousness of their jobs caused by the pandemic led many delivery workers to strengthen their collective articulation and to internationalize collective organization. Their major demands included pay increases, adequate personal protective equipment, justice in memory of workers who lost their lives, emergency bonuses for being essential workers, and health measures such as tests and quarantines. The authors note that the current pandemic has made life more precarious for delivery workers in Latin America, and there is no unanimity among the workers regarding the best solutions, yet the increasing international integration can help develop representative organizations at the supranational level.

In “Pandemia y crisis del sujeto neoliberal: Algunas reflexiones sobre la emergencia del Covid-19,” Diego Alejandro López González and Edward Herrera Sanclemente reflect on some of the ways that the pandemic has revealed fractures in modern life. Like Coelho, de Jesus, and Silva, López González and Herrera Sanclemente suggest that COVID-19 and the responses to it have implications for neoliberalism. They argue that in recent decades, neoliberalism—spread through the processes of globalization—has reoriented individuals’ lives and identities in terms analogous to markets. The authors evoke the words of Michel Foucault, who in his lectures on neoliberalism, argued that it made

individuals “entrepreneurs of themselves.” One’s access to the consumer market helps shape one’s identity, and individuals are motivated by both the fear of failure and the search for security.

As López González and Herrera Sanclemente observe, some of these same characteristics of the neoliberal regime both facilitated the spread of Covid-19—through tourism, business travel, and shipping—and influenced responses to the idea of an interventionist state limiting the autonomy of consumption and freedom of mobility. Health measures taken by governments to slow the spread of the virus led to negative and sometimes dramatic economic consequences, such as the loss of GDP, and increases in unemployment, poverty, and violence. And importantly, the spread of the virus further exacerbated social inequalities and sociopolitical conflicts. Finally, while some groups see the pandemic as an opportunity to “reinvent” themselves as self-entrepreneurs, the most vulnerable in society are mainly focused simply on how to survive the crisis. The authors conclude that the threats and risks caused by the pandemic have raised awareness of some existing (but often hidden) fractures of neoliberalism, namely inequalities and social exclusions. The crisis—and governments’ responses to it—may force people to reassess their social relationships and ultimately to redefine their ontological condition as neoliberal subjects.

In “Politics of Expertise and Blame during COVID-19 Quarantine in Chile,” Kelly Bauer and Claudio A. Villalobos examine how government officials and politicians rationalize their handling of the current pandemic, their choice of expertise and data, and their assignment of blame and responsibility. The authors focus on Santiago during the first six months of the pandemic, where the vast majority of coronavirus cases in Chile were concentrated, and where officials implemented a number of quarantines and curfews. Bauer and Villalobos cite extensive literature demonstrating the tension between scientific expertise and policymaking. In the Chilean case, they contend that relations between political and medical authorities have been at best tenuous. This may come as a surprise to some, given the neoliberal reforms that privileged technocratic expertise in Chile, and a relatively strong public health system. However, the authors describe the response of the Sebastián Piñera administration to the health crisis as a “dizzying and confusing patchwork” and note that initial government-provided statistics regarding the pandemic were shrouded in uncertainty.

In the second half of the research note, Bauer and Villalobos turn to the politicians’ contrasting rhetoric regarding the response to COVID, arguing that this rhetoric is an important reflection of policymakers’ “struggle over alternative realities.” Their analysis suggests that the left-wing politicians’ rhetoric emphasized the government’s responsibility for the failed policies and called for greater democratization in policymaking with respect to COVID. In contrast, the Piñera government and right-wing politicians largely denied the government’s responsibility for the failure of its quarantine policies and placed the blame instead on individuals, particular groups, or the virus itself. The solution, according to this line of reasoning, was more extreme policing of the quarantine. For the most part, the government and right-wing officials did not try to justify these arguments based on information from medical and public health experts. The authors conclude that this is concerning, as it may indicate a broader trend “to preserve and extend elite control at the expense of democratic accountabilities,” particularly at a time when Chile is preparing to elect representatives to draft a new constitution.

In “The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Impacts on Social Welfare in Brazil: The Rise of Poverty and Inequalities,” Daniel Francisco Nagao Menezes and Ernani Contipelli consider how widespread inequality and high levels of poverty in Latin America both affect, and are affected by, the current health crisis. Extreme social inequalities have led to exclusion and discrimination among significant portions of the population, which in turn have made these groups more vulnerable to COVID. Moreover, experts predict that the pandemic will significantly worsen an already difficult economic situation throughout the region, including a severe drop in GDP and a significant increase in both unemployment and the number of people living in poverty. The authors focus on the Brazilian case, where a political-economic crisis starting in 2014 resulted in a dramatic rise in unemployment, deepened by labor reforms carried out by the Bolsonaro administration. Brazil has been one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19, currently ranking behind only the US in the number of deaths. Fortunately for Brazilians, they are guaranteed access to the public health system; unfortunately, the system has been both underfunded and overloaded by the crisis, and as we have already noted, President Bolsonaro has not developed a national program to address it.

In their conclusions, Nagao Menezes and Contipelli turn to COVID’s implications for policymaking and the social welfare state. They point out that Latin American governments have adopted different strategies thus far for combatting the virus, some with more success than others. And while acknowledging that policies need to be adapted to national principles, the authors assert that governments must consider the high level of social inequality in responding to the pandemic. On the one hand, poorly-designed policies in such an unequal world can be devastating. On the other, the crisis could provide a historic opportunity for Brazil and other Latin American countries to rethink and improve their existing economic and political structures. Ultimately, the authors argue that the current health crisis has demonstrated the need for strengthening the social welfare state and prioritizing health and healthcare systems. The notion that COVID-19, for all its tragic consequences, might also provide opportunities for important structural reforms, is something that López González and Herrera Sanclemente also suggest in their article.

While learning more about the contemporary effects of COVID-19 on Latin America is important for its own sake, it also is critical for us as scholars and students of the region. Currently, we are witnessing the impact that the first wave of the pandemic brought to Latin American societies, exacerbating the unsolved structural inequalities. As a result, social protest has been triggered to pre-pandemic levels, no matter how deadly it becomes to march on the streets. Therefore, the texts in this special issue can provide some insights for future research about the sociopolitical effects of the pandemic, considering that a second wave is here, and experts predict a third wave. These reflections on the coronavirus pandemic can ground future lines of research, as well as provide clues for public policies that might contribute to lessening the worst impacts of the pandemic.

Cultural responses to the pandemic show that in times of crisis, creativity intensifies. Statistics are not the focus; science-based truths are not the goal; analysis is not the method. Poetry especially, as one of the most intimate and personal means of expression, can provide images and concepts for understanding the myriad reactions to unprecedented upheavals in lived realities.

*MARLAS* sought to capture the coronavirus pandemic in Latin American poetry and invited submissions of poems by September 2020. A blind review by peer evaluators selected thirty-five writers, who were divided into two groups due to publication restrictions. The first poems were published in the December 2020 *MARLAS* issue, and the others are here in María Roof's "Nos/otros: poesía de la pandemia, parte 2." In her introductions to the selections, Roof notes that, sometimes after initial periods of "paralysis" due to overwhelming desperation, poets chose this individual and collective means for catharsis, comfort, refuge, and escape, but also, for a celebration of survival and life to be shared with others—an outpouring that creates meaning by imposing the order of rhythm, sound, and images and proposes human connectedness and solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the poems support the panorama presented in this special issue and illustrate the multiple areas in which the pandemic chips away at our trust in assumed truths and values. Fear of your neighbor—the other as your henchman—collides against a sense of solidarity. Sudden immersion into irreality suggests you are not awake but dreaming a nightmare. So many deaths, so many inequalities challenge your perception of social progress as you struggle to manage your own safety and access to basic protections. Nothing will ever be the same again, if we survive. How can this be imagined? We can be conscious of the almost one million COVID deaths (as of September 2020; 2.3 million by February 2021),<sup>11</sup> and in attempts at comprehension, poets craft new images of unimaginably lonely, undignified deaths. Are we facing an unknown new world and fulfilling ancient apocalyptic prophecies? Words change. Do "masked" and "ball" fit together anymore? Stay-at-home orders reveal the porosity of traditional connotations of "home," as it becomes a prison cell, a casket for the uncollected dead, a cave of domestic terror for women and girls. As Chilean poet Raúl Zurita says, this pandemic, in its omnipresence and its horror, makes poetry more intensely real.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, we want to extend our heartfelt thanks to all of the authors whose work is included in this special issue, as well as to the external reviewers who read the initial drafts and provided valuable comments and critiques. We acknowledge the sacrifice of doing this kind of academic work during a global pandemic, when there are so many other demands on our time, energies, and attention. Finally, we want to note that we were delighted to receive a number of other submissions on a wide variety of subjects related to the COVID-19 crisis in several countries. For a variety of reasons, we were not able to include them in this special issue but have encouraged the contributors to resubmit them in the future. We look forward to continuing to provide new scholarship, analysis, and COVID-related theories in our June and December 2021 issues.

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<sup>10</sup> María Roof, "Sacudidas privadas compartidas: poesía de la pandemia," *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* 4 (2), 2020: 261–281. <https://doi.org/10.23870/marlas.350>

<sup>11</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)," Sept. 27, 2020. [20200928-weekly-epi-update.pdf \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/20200928-weekly-epi-update). Worldometer, updated Feb. 6, 2021. [Coronavirus Update \(Live\): 106,212,082 Cases and 2,316,094 Deaths from COVID-19 Virus Pandemic - Worldometer \(worldometers.info\)](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/).

<sup>12</sup> "Raúl Zurita reivindica la poesía como defensa ante 'todas las pandemias.'" *La Conexión USA/EFE*, Nov. 25, 2020. [www.laconexionusa.com/noticias/20201125149537\\_lc14953725.asp](http://www.laconexionusa.com/noticias/20201125149537_lc14953725.asp).

**Diane E. Johnson** is Professor Emerita of Politics at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. She has authored book chapters and articles on the mass media and media–state relations and on interest group politics, mainly in Argentina and Uruguay. She is coeditor with Fernando López-Alves of *Globalization and Uncertainty in Latin America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and *Populist Nationalism in Europe and the Americas* (Routledge, 2018). She is the associate editor for social sciences for the *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* (MARLAS) and a past president of the Middle Atlantic Council of Latin American Studies.

**Mario Siddhartha Portugal Ramírez** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security and Global Governance, University of Massachusetts Boston. He earned a Master’s degree in Sociology from the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) Sede Ecuador. He is the coauthor with Astrid Bosch of *Ciudadanías rurales: nuevas herramientas de participación ciudadana y control social en Saavedra y Uncía* (Plural Editores, 2010) and has published scholarly articles, mainly on health-related issues. He currently serves as director of La Fanesca Política, a political blog focused on Latin America.

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